The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice (review)

B. Venkat Mani

Monatshefte, Volume 100, Number 4, Winter 2008, pp. 616-618 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mon.0.0079*

speak of historically—and one ought surely to add personally—changing "attitudes" towards aging.

In an assembly of authors and disciplines as wide-ranging as this, it is to be expected that methodologies, conclusions, and quality should vary greatly. What is impressive is how many good contributions there are and how very good the best ones are. The medieval historian Jonathan R. Lyon offers perhaps the most subtle and sophisticated article. He concentrates on two 12th-century Saxon noblemen and their reasons for withdrawing from the world shortly before their deaths to monastic foundations to which they had been important patrons. The monastic sources for both men's lives construct pious legends focusing on the nobles' desire to renounce their secular and violent ways. Lyon's ingenious reading between the lines of these chronicles and other sources uncovers more complex and ambivalent motivations, including political or domestic face-saving and power struggles.

The many literary/cultural studies and art historical articles frequently display finely nuanced appreciations of what was considered typical of "old age." Classen's assertion that literary sources, as opposed to traditional historical or theological ones, offer a greater variety of perspective on attitudes towards old age is amply confirmed. What these cultural studies essays also make abundantly clear is that old age is a social construction. But if old age is conceived primarily as a construct that draws on traditions and commonplaces from a wide variety of sources, religious, literary, and cultural, then the hopes of some of the authors here to glean insights from literary or other sources into the "reality" of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance seem misplaced. There is no "old age" susceptible to an objective analysis. It remains rather a perception that can differ radically from person to person, from observer to observed. Compelling and often disturbing evidence for this is found in the excellent articles here on old age and women.

This is a stimulating and often fascinating assembly of viewpoints and material that will justly elicit and provoke further research and reflection. How unfortunate that the book is marred by uneven editing. For the most part superb, in at least one article it is negligent to a degree that renders some of its paragraphs gibberish.

University of Massachusetts-Amherst —*Robert G. Sullivan*

The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice.
By John Pizer. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. x + 190 pages. $39.95.

The first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a resurgence of discussions around the term "World Literature." A number of volumes have been published just in the last five years: Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2003), David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003), Christopher Prendergast's anthology *Debating World Literature* (2004), to name just a few. Casanova explores the international space of literary activity; Damrosch traces the elliptical trajectory of works of literature in translation that takes them beyond national/regional points of origin; Prendergast and contributors discuss the specific local implications of these debates and their efficacies for various linguistic traditions. More recently, in the encyclopedic two-volume study *The Novel* (2007), Franco Moretti (editor) and the contributors

have attempted to 'map' the genre out of national traditions, into the larger context of World Literature.

John Pizer's *The Idea of World Literature* is a timely and significant—albeit comparatively brief—contribution to these discussions and debates. This study distinguishes itself from the others in three central ways: first, through its focused examination of the history of origin and development of the term *Weltliteratur* in Germany from the early to late 19th century and into the 20th century; second, through its detailed exploration of the transatlantic afterlife of the term as "World Literature" in the US academy starting with the late 19th century; and finally through its discussion of the relevance of these traditions and debates for contemporary pedagogical practices. This combination is the most conspicuous achievement of Pizer's book: apart from pursuing a transnational and transhistorical investigation of the term, Pizer aims to provide academic practitioners—teachers and students—of World Literature a "metatheoretical dimension" (17).

Pizer starts with posing the question, "What is *Weltliteratur* and Why Teach It in a World Literature in English Translation Course" (introduction), ending with the comment on "A Metatheoretical Approach to Teaching World Literature" (afterword). A total of seven chapters examine *Weltliteratur*/World Literature not only as a concept and practice, but also as a discursive paradigm, a disciplinary category, and a mode of comparative examination of literatures. The introduction underlines the significance of this line of inquiry by locating World Literature in contemporary discussions of migration and economic globalization, raising thereby the pertinent threat of cultural homogenization of literary works through consumption, in English-language translations, in a university classroom. Following this, Pizer spotlights moments of German literary and cultural history in the 19th century through Goethe, Heine, and Marx (chapters 2 and 3), unfolding multiple layers of conception, reception, and circulation of the term within literary debates in the German-speaking world, all against the backdrop of political developments marked by 1848 and 1871. Reevaluations of these debates as they continue into the 20th century are performed through discussions of works by Fritz Strich and Erich Auerbach among others (chapter 4). In chapter 5, Pizer recounts the entry of the term in the United States through Margaret Fuller's translation of Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe*. One of the most important aspects of the book is its discussion of curricular developments in the US in the early 20th century prompted by critics such as Thomas Wentworth Higginson, pursued by scholars such as Ralph P. Rosenberg and educators such as Richard G. Moulton (University of Chicago) and Philo Buck (University of Wisconsin-Madison) with regards to the form, content, and value/purpose of courses on "Great Books" and "World Literature" alongside the growing field of comparative literature. (I state these institutional affiliations to highlight the formative sites of World Literature courses in the US.) The last section of this chapter connects the earlier debates with those around canonicity and multiculturalism in the late 20th century—an extension of which can be found in the final chapter, which includes a reading of two works by the (Syrian) German author Rafik Schami.

The range and scope of Pizer's work, the investigative archive it sets up, and the documents it calls upon to attest to the significance of a discussion on World Literature are indeed vast. The focus of the volume assists in containing this vastness in a comprehensible whole.

A single book cannot be held responsible for addressing or answering all the questions it raises. Pizer's book raises a number of important questions for further research; however, it is important to note that it does not always articulate or 'release' the epistemic and pedagogical tensions underlying these questions. First and foremost—since the book focuses on translation and pedagogy—is the question of literature in translation, its implications for the discipline of Comparative Literature, and for the future of foreign language and literature departments in the United States. To be fair, Pizer duly touches upon all of the above-mentioned points and even raises the essential question of homogenization of literatures through hegemony and so forth. However, his discussions remain partially suggestive; the energy that animated the canon debates of the late 80s and early 90s or even the controversy sparked by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's much-contested Wellek Library Lectures on Comparative Literature published as *Death of a Discipline* (2003) is only latently present in chapter 5. Second, the discussion of Goethe and later Heine does not adequately locate their texts in the growing print-culture industry in Germany—or in any non-European spaces in the 19th century. Why were Chinese novels being translated into English and German at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries? What were the novels that were being circulated in translation and read by Goethe? To what extent was this responsible for a developing idea of "*Bildung*"? Why should this *Bildung* be understood as necessarily cosmopolitan?

Similar questions could have been asked in greater detail about the resurgence of discussions on World Literature in US universities immediately following the two World Wars and, most recently, September 11, 2001. While Pizer engages with evaluative vocabularies of "Eurocentrism" (introduction) and Third World Literature and the Jameson-Ahmad debate (chapter 5), the visible lack of curiosity about the circulation of literary objects originating in the non-European space into Europe through mercantilism and colonialism renders such discussions unproductively incomplete. Last, but not least, the conceptual conflation of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism in the study is rather tendentious and amounts to an unsophisticated treatment of "difference" itself. The privileging of Gadamer's hermeneutic model (contested even by Azade Seyhan, discussed by Pizer) for understanding "Other" literary traditions and innovations therefore obfuscates the confrontations between the Universal, the Particular, the Cosmopolitan, and the Multicultural that form the subtext of Pizer's study.

This small set of critical points does not detract from the richness of Pizer's interventions and the subject of his study. The book is to be recommended to anyone interested in World Literature and/or more specifically, a practitioner struggling through "the range of material World Literature instructors are asked to cover in this new century" (4).

University of Wisconsin-Madison —*B. Venkat Mani*

Ästhetik der Beschreibung. Poetische und kulturelle Energie deskriptiver Texte (1700–2000).

Von Heinz Drügh. Tübingen: Francke, 2006. viii + 468 Seiten. €78,00.

Beschreibungen sind langweilig: So schnöde lässt sich die Tendenz von Lessings Schrift *Laokoon oder: über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766) zusammen-